

Small Mistake At Bus Station Brought On A World Of Misery

By Monte Noelke

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Page 8

MERTZON — The Shortgrass country could have been turned back to the Indians this week, and I wouldn't have noticed the new owners. My Irish-American mother-in-law has been under foot since Monday. Confusion and bedlam have ruled over my household to such a degree that it's a wonder I haven't fallen into a trance the likes of which would make a two-trip LSD user think somebody had put talcum in his powders.

In the tender years of my marriage into her clan, this precious chip off the flinty portion of the Blarney Stone didn't cause so much fuss. She would periodically drop by to comfort her daughter. But other than lowering my spouse's morale by quoting statistics on the awful fate for ranchers' wives, these early visits were marked by the gay-hearted charm which legends and fairy tales attribute to the Irish people.

Oh, once or twice — or maybe it was a dozen or so times — she rapped my knuckles with the back edge of a butcher knife. But after I learned that I must always light her cigarettes, that habit disappeared. A person unaccustomed to living around the followers of St. Patrick might have taken exception to the way she barked my shins for failing to know every Irish tenor in the United States. And some super-sensitive soul might have resented the time she jabbed her finger in my left eye for mentioning that Admiral Nelson was a good seaman. I had to learn the hard way that, at best, the Irish think the British hero was a fink.

But alas, those days of playful chiding are past. Now the old battler is as out of sorts as a sore-footed tight roper walker. She's as mad as can be over a harmless incident that occurred on her last trip out here.

What happened to destroy our pleasant relations took place when I was dispatched from the fury of the shearing pens to meet her at the bus. In the haste to receive shipment, the wrong mother-in-law was loaded in my car.

It was an understandable mistake. The bus depot was filled with sweet (skin deep) little old ladies. As I've tried to tell my wife and her sideline quarterback a hundred times, it simply wasn't feasible to pair off the throngs of in-laws milling about the terminal. But they wouldn't listen then, and judging from how the effects of this event are growing progressively worse, chances are they won't listen ten years from now.

Both mother and daughter continue harping about the affair as if it were something I'd done deliberately. They keep magnifying the fact that I drove 20 miles toward the ranch without being aware that this other granny wasn't the correct person. And they carry on about this mismatching as if making dogies of mothers-in-law was some sort of crime, like throwing red hot peppers in the gruel at the orphanage.

The worse sequence of the incident, according to them is the part where I tried to get the proper son-in-law to take his old lady back. There's no way of convincing them that I was only joshing when I offered this stranger \$40 in hard cash to take both mothers-in-law off my hands.

From the time of this misadventure to the present, there hasn't been one second of peace when this disciple of the shamrock is around my house. The bus company won't admit that they erred in adopting the policy of freighting mothers-in-law around the country. And the nights are too cold to sleep out in the pasture.

So as it stands today, I couldn't swear whether the courthouses are still standing in the Shortgrass Country. All I know is that there's enough trouble and misery on this cold old earth without having a one-sided grudge fight to mark every waking hour.